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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/27/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [GB](#)
SUBJECT: GABON: GOVERNMENT AT A NEAR-STANDSTILL

REF: A. LIBREVILLE 0052
[1](#)B. LIBREVILLE 0022

Classified By: DCM Nathan Holt for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Gabonese President El Hadjj Omar Bongo Ondimba has been in Morocco since February 5, attending to his ailing 45-year old wife Edith, who is said to be incapacitated and possibly near death. A media blackout on the case continues in Gabon, and all but the most critical government decisions have been deferred until the president resurfaces. Meanwhile, Bongo's domestic and international worries have proliferated, with labor unrest in Gabon and a seizure of the president's bank accounts in France. The result in Gabon is a political atmosphere of uncertainty and mounting worry. End Summary.

Absent President, Ailing First Lady

[1](#)2. (C) Bongo's three week absence is unprecedented in his 41-year presidency, according to experienced Gabonese observers. First Lady Edith Bongo, who is also the daughter of Republic of Congo (Brazzaville) President Denis Sassou Nguesso, is incapacitated at a Moroccan hospital and by some accounts near death. Gabonese media have maintained a near-total blackout on the First Lady's illness and the reasons for the president's absence. Other than a television report showing Prime Minister Jean Eyeghe Ndong and other ministers at a prayer service for Edith Bongo, her illness has not otherwise been publicly acknowledged.

[1](#)3. (C) Several government ministers, ruling party officials and AU Chairman Jean Ping (Bongo's former foreign minister and long-time collaborator) have called on Bongo in Morocco. Coverage of these meetings has been extremely limited. The official press acknowledged a meeting with Parti Democratique Gabonais (PDG) Secretary General Faustin Boukoubi, at which Bongo approved the nomination of a new president of the Senate, Rose Rogombe. (Note: Under Gabon's constitution, the senate president becomes interim head of state in the event of the president's death or incapacity, and has 30-45 days to organize and election. Rogombe is widely viewed as a more compliant political figure than her predecessor. End Note.)

[1](#)4. (C) The only recent public images of Bongo came during his February 19 meeting with AU Chairman Ping. The two reportedly discussed a wide range of regional issues, including Sudan and Zimbabwe. In still and video images, Bongo appears frail, and as in other recent public appearances is shown seated behind a table rather than standing or walking.

¶5. (C) Senior officials tell us that because of the president's absence, Gabon's highly centralized government is at a near standstill. Ministers have also confided to various other diplomats and representatives of international agencies that they have put all major plans on hold until the president resurfaces.

Some Problems Won't Wait

¶6. (C) Labor and budget problems nevertheless plague the Gabonese government, and appear to be worsening, despite--or in some cases because of--the president's absence. Bongo's personal intervention ended a months-long teacher's strike on January 14. The main teacher's union now accuses the government of failing to keep the promises made in January, and is again threatening to walk out. According to education officials, even a brief suspension of classes would result in an "annee blanche," forcing students scheduled to sit required exams to repeat the entire academic year.

¶7. (C) Gabon's health sector is also in a serious crisis, with public hospitals and clinics functioning at minimal levels or not at all. Since January 12, health workers have been on strike, seeking pay increases and other benefits broadly similar to those achieved by the teachers. Government negotiators say they will not budge, and accuse the strikers of failing to live up to legal requirements to provide a minimum level of health service. Independent observers, including the local representative of the World Health Organization, describe the current situation as

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chaotic. Prime Minister Ndong has stated publicly, and credibly, that many people have died for lack of access to health facilities during the strike. Minister of Defense Ali Bongo (the president's son and, some say, heir-apparent) has dispatched military health workers to some hospitals and clinics to keep them open.

¶8. (C) In recent interviews with labor union officials from a wide range of sectors, Emboffs found common themes: Gabon reaped enormous profits from the high oil prices of 2008, they assert, and Government should share those benefits with the workers. Instead, ordinary workers and other citizens are left to cope with rising costs of housing and basic foodstuffs and stagnant wages.

¶9. (C) Officials from the Ministry of Finance and the International Monetary Fund, however, paint a different picture. Gabon currently spends almost half its operating budget on salaries, they claim. The generous settlement offered the teachers has inspired workers in other sectors to press hard for better wages, threatening to worsen Gabon's budget deficit from about 9% of GDP to an unsustainable level of 14-15%. Officials in and out of government also acknowledge that many public sector employees draw salaries but do not report to work. Newly-named Minister of Mining and Petroleum Casimir Oye Mba recently told a confidant that the ministry has 600 employees, of whom about 100 report to work on any given day, and about 15 are both productive and competent.

Freezing Bongo's Accounts in France

¶10. (U) French authorities executing the judgment of Bordeaux court froze Bongo's accounts in two leading French banks February 26, according to widespread press reports. The court has required Bongo to pay 457,347 Euro, plus interest, to reimburse a company whose president was thrown into a Gabonese jail in 1996. After a business deal with Bongo's associates went sour, the company was required to pay the money into Bongo's personal account in France to secure

the businessman's release.

¶11. (C) There has been no official reaction so far in Gabon to the French court's action. Before his wife's health deteriorated, however, Bongo gave an interview to a sympathetic journalist in which he claimed there is a plot, organized in France, against him. "We are armed with patience. Maybe we will end up knowing the truth," he said in the interview, republished on his personal website. "Our French interlocutors, are they firemen or pyromaniacs?" he asked. Others close to the president are more blunt, and claim that the "plot" against Bongo is backed by powerful figures in the French government, if not President Nicolas Sarkozy himself.

Comment

¶12. (C) Bongo's multiplying problems pose problems for Gabon. Worries are growing within the political class, but also among ordinary citizens, about the management of the country during the president's prolonged absence. A steady hand, and perhaps some good luck, will be needed to address labor unrest and associated crises in Gabon's education and health sectors. The deteriorating health of First Lady Edith Bongo, worrisome lawsuits and corruption charges, and a chill in relations with France add to the woes of the aging and ailing president, and will make it more difficult for Bongo to address the country's problems when he returns. End
Comment.
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